I Believe...In God
Mark 1:9-15
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I received a delightful letter from a girl in a former congregation. She was in the ninth grade at the time and had been in the confirmation class the year before. Her letter began like this:

"Dear Reverend Buchanan:
My friends have decided to be atheists. I'm now an atheist too. What I want to know is this: What do atheists believe? Is it OK to be a church member and an atheist?"

And then the issue that I suspect prompted the letter in the first place -

"Will you come back and marry me if I'm an atheist?"

Thus the question of God is set in the honest ambiguities of life and often seems to be a matter of reason, emotion and social custom. It is a question that haunts us as long as we live. In his excellent little volume on Christian Doctrine, the British theologian J.S.Whale begins with a story. "A young curate once called on William Stubbs, Bishop of Oxford, to ask him for advice about preaching. The great man was silent for a moment and then replied 'Preach about God; and preach about twenty minutes'". Whale comments: "the Christian preacher has many opportunities, but one theme...the reality, nature and purpose of the living God." (Christian Doctrine, p.11)

Throughout the fall we shall be thinking about some of the basic doctrines of Christian Faith as they are announced in the Apostles' Creed. This morning - the first great affirmation: "I believe...in God."

The very first thing Jesus said, according to Mark - the earliest Gospel writer - was "Repent and believe the Gospel of God." And while that admonition may have been perfectly clear to those who heard it, Christian men and women have been discussing it, thinking about it, arguing over it ever since. The Gospel has meant different things to different people in different times. But, normally, everyone agrees that it begins by acknowledging the existence of God. To believe - to believe the Gospel - traditionally has begun with the acceptance of certain statements about God. To believe has had to do ultimately with the Creeds. And at this beginning point we encounter our first problem.

Throughout its long history the Christian Church has produced statements in order to describe what it believes. More often than not the Creeds were written to counteract heresy, or at least to nudge Christian thought back to its foundations whenever it began to drift.

Thus when the Church was seriously divided over the issue of the nature of Christ in the fourth century, it gathered its best minds and produced a Creed - the Nicene Creed - which addressed that issue in the terms and style of the dispute as it was then occurring. The language and philosophic categories of the Nicene Creed are not ours. But most importantly, its essence is the resolution of a particular dispute of theology. In the 1930's, when Nazi theoroticians were claiming to possess ultimate truth and National Socialism was fast becoming the new religion of Germany, the "Confessing Church" gathered its thinkers and produced the Theological Declaration of Barmen, a Creed which makes a courageous affirmation of the sovereignty of God in the face of political totalitarianism. In the 1960's, when it appeared that

American culture was coming apart at the seams the United Presbyterian Church gathered its thinkers and produced the Confession of 1967, a statement which addresses the problems of alienation and polarization in terms of Christian reconciliation.

The Creeds, one and all, are the words of men. The authority they bear is the authority of the Church's accumulated experience. We take that very seriously but in the Protestant tradition neither the Church, nor its Councils and spokesmen are infallible. The Creeds were not dictated by God. Their purpose is not to confine. Nor is it to test, weekly, the orthodoxy of those who happen to use them. Presbyterians, particularly, who put a premium on theology, need to remember that a Christian is a person who follows Jesus Christ. The act of becoming a Christian is not the agreeing to the truth of certain ideas but the obedient following of Jesus Christ.

In fact, John Oman pointed out long ago that there is no "ought" in the matter of belief. That is to say, it is intellectually dishonest to believe something because someone says you should. According to Oman a person should believe only what he can no longer avoid believing. "Truth", he taught, "is not something we agree to reluctantly but something that siezes us and compels our attention. We misunderstand rather completely the nature and function of the Apostles' Creed, for instance, when we regard it as the standard to which we must conform in order to call ourselves Christians. And those who make doctrinal orthodoxy the criterion for judging whether or not someone else is a Christian and create lists of doctrine which must be subscribed need the gentle reminder that men followed Jesus Christ before it occurred to them to write Creeds and that St. Paul apparently never even heard of the Virgin Birth.

What, then, is the function of the Creeds? Why bother with them at all? They exist and are used by the Church to define as nearly as possible the content of the faith. That needs doing in our day particularly, I believe. There is a certain blandness about the very popular religiosity of the American people. God is popular but none too precise in our vocabulary. If He is envisioned at all, more often than not it is in pedestrian symbols that border on blasphemy: the man upstairs, a kindly uncle, a white robed and bearded mystic who loves us more than, and at the expense of everybody else.

There is a large mid-western Church which used to place in its pews a card for visitors which announced: "This Church is not bound by any Creed but requires of its members only loyalty to the truth." A list of truths was included, which is a Creed of course; - the divinity of the human spirit, the perfectability of character, the certainty of progress. Jesus made it on the list of truths as our greatest teacher and example. (The Creed of Christian Teaching, James D. Smart, p.26). Now it is not the function of Creeds to confine. And yet the theology inherent in that statement reflects the worn-out cliches of 1920's liberalism and simply has very little to do with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Creeds are a needed norm: a touch stone of belief: a corrective for what is the current theological "fad": a standard by which I can measure my own pilgrimage of faith against a pilgrimage that has two thousand years of history behind it. William Barclay reminds us that the proper form of all Creeds, except that credo you personally have written, is "we believe". The Creeds keep us in touch with the historic faith of the Church. To use them in worship is not to say that each person understands and believes everything in them. It is, rather, an identification of a single individual with the whole Church of Jesus Christ. "This is the faith of the Church - I stand within it."

The Apostles' Creed, one of the very oldest, and the most popular in terms of its continuing liturgical use by the Church, begins with God. "I believe in God." The simplicity of the statement should not hide its immensity. The question has been with us forever. Christopher Fry warns against a too casual acceptance of this basic belief by calling the exploration into God "the longest stride of soul men ever took". Even the atheist is grudging, reluctant and wistful in his non-belief. Madelyn Murray O'Hare may be combative. Most thoughtful atheists wish it could be otherwise. So the American poet Robert Lowell:

> "When will we see Him face to face?
> Each day He shines through darker glass.
> In this small town where everything
> Is known, I see His vanishing
> emblems, His white spire and flag-
> pole sticking out above the fog
> like old white china door-knobs, sad,
> slight, useless things to calm the mad."
>
> (Waking Early Sunday Morning
> in Theology Today, April 1976, p.19).

The question of God haunts even those who choose not to believe. And for those who do there must always be that humble, reverent, near-agnosticism of the very wise who know how presumptuous it is to try to talk about God. Pascal was astonished at the "boldness with which people undertake to speak about God". And Leslie Weatherhead made a great deal of honest sense when he wrote: "There is something almost ludicrous in sitting down at a desk and writing the word 'God' at the top of a sheet of paper and then being presumptuous enough to add anything...I feel that the most appropriate thing to do would be to leave half a dozen blank sheets of paper." (The Christian Agnostic, p.71).

We begin with the humble acknolwedgment that the topic is so immense that our minds will never encompass all of it. And yet the human mind returns again and again to the question, almost as if it is drawn or driven to do so. We cannot comprehend God totally. We cannot prove that He exists - yet we cannot stop using our minds. Consider for a minute some of the arguments that men have found convincing. The first is that the existence of order and design in the universe is evidence of an organizer and designer. Certainly it stretches the imagination more to assume that the order of the universe is the result of chance than to conclude that there is a mind operating to produce order. Edwin Conklin, a biologist, put it sharply. "The probability of life originating from accident is comparable to the probability of the unabridged dictonary resulting from an explosion in a print shop." (Weatherhead, p. 87).

Another expression of that position is in a story: "Suppose a man is walking across a field and he happens to hit his foot against a watch. He picks it up; he has never seen a watch before: he examines it. He sees that the hands are moving around the dial in an orderly way. He opens it up and finds inside a whole host of wheels, cogs, levers and springs. He discovers that the whole complicated machinery is operating in what is obviously a predetermined manner. What then does he say?'By chance all these wheels, levers and springs came together and formed themselves into the thing I have in my hand. By chance they set themselves going. By chance they move in an orderly way'...No...If he applies his mind to this problem at all, he says, 'I have found a watch - somewhere there must be a watchmaker.'" (William Barclay, The Apostles Creed for Everyman, p.28). The argument is as old as the stoic

philosophers. The discovery of order in the universe is at very least a strong suggestion that there is an intelligence in operation creating order.

Another argument for God grows out of awareness of the sheer fathomless magnitude of the universe. There is a delightful vignette about a Scots highlander who suggested to his stern and unimaginative parochial preacher one day that he might consider studying a little astronomy. "Why?" asked the clergyman. The man replied, "Because you've an awful wee God." The Psalmist, centuries ago, looked into a night sky and put the question in perspective: "When I look at the heavens, the work of Thy fingers, the moon and stars which Thou hast established, what is man that Thou art mindful of him?" (Psalm 8). The humble Scot was right. When our estimation of how much we think we know becomes a bit inflated it helps to take a dose of elementary astronomy.

That discipline deals with "light years" as a basic unit of measurement. It is, as you know, the distance light travels in one year, at 186,000 miles every second. The nearest star is Alpha Centauri: it takes the light from that star four years and three months to arrive at the earth. Light from the Pole Star has been traveling for 466 years through space before we see it. That is to say, when you look through a telescope at the Pole Star what your sense of sight records is the light which left its point of origin in 1510 A.D. I'm no astronomer, but I deduce that for all I know the Pole Star may have disappeared three centuries ago. For as long as people have had the capacity to reflect on it, the sheer size of the created order has led them to a quiet reverence, an inexpressible sense that "eternity" means God.

The fact is, the more we know the more it becomes apparent that we don't know very much at all. Our evidence is incomplete: we can marshall all the arguments our minds are capable of comprehending and they don't amount to very much. In no sense of the word can we regard the human mind as big enough to nail down the whole truth. Even the truth we establish is relative and incomplete: as in the case of the five year old child of a famous surgeon who is told that his father drugs the people who come to him for help, and after they are unconscious cuts them with a knife, and when they finally recover from his cutting, charges them money for his services. It's true - but it's incomplete.

To believe that God exists is an act of faith. It is not, and cannot be proven, which is to say that it doesn't fall into the category of knowledge. But likewise the position of atheism, the belief that God does not exist, is an act of faith. It cannot be proven nor known. It demands as much trust beyond the power of reason, as the most devout act of piety.

That is why, perhaps, the Bible spends no time arguing for the existence of God. That is simply not the issue; nor is it the issue when we say in the Creed "I believe in God". The concern of the Bible is with idolatry: the worship of false gods. Israel's special wisdom in the ancient world was not that there was a God, but that God is one, His name is Jahweh, He is the God of Abraham and Isaac, and He chooses us as His people and wants us to obey His law.

Between ninety-three and ninety-six per cent of the American people believe in God, depending on which poll you trust. God is invoked at political rallies and P.T.A. meetings: I read last week that the Michigan-State coach described his full-back's ability to elude tacklers as a "God-given gift". If that statement is true, one must conclude that God favors Buckeye backs even more, not an outlandish suggestion in Columbus, at least - a grudging admission for someone who grew up in the shadow of State College, Pennsylvania.

The fact, about which we must be very honest, is that the God in whom ninety-three percent of the people believe is not the God about whom we are trying to speak in the words of the Apostles' Creed. James Smart puts it this way: "Far from rejoicing at this as a sign of what a God-fearing nation we are, we should recognize in it one of the chief obstacles in the way of genuine Christian Faith...The cheap admission of God's existence can be a kind of innoculation against a more virulent and costly faith." (The Creed in Christian Theology, p.40).

The men who crucified Jesus believed in God. In fact their belief in God was what motivated them to do what they did. The early Christians were called atheists because they refused to accept the deities of Rome. Painful as it is, let us never forget that belief in God inspired the Inquisition: that the racism of South Africa has been supported by God-fearing churchmen and grounded in a particular interpretation of Scripture: that Christians are dispatching one another in Northern Ireland: and that in the name of God, men somehow found it possible in this nation to lynch and murder and plant bombs in Black Sunday Schools.

The existence of God is not the issue: idolatry is: Israel had to decide which God to follow. To believe in God, to say "yes" to Jahweh, was to say "no" to all the other gods competing for attention. That is still the fundamental issue. Are you willing to relinquish whatever else is motivating, forming and driving you? Are you open to this God? "I believe in God" does not mean "I'm convinced that there is a God." It means "I trust the God who has revealed Himself in Jesus Christ: I follow Him first: He - and nothing else - is the Lord of my life." To believe in God today is to reject the popular idolatries of our culture - materialism, pleasure, security, and to live, intentionally and consciously, in obedience to the will of Him whom we profess.

What is God like? Our minds will take us part of the way: He is the giver of order in the universe: He is the designer of snowflakes and mountain ranges: He is larger than anything our minds can comprehend yet He is real in the fragile life of the smallest child. Faith regards all that as evidence. But ultimately, the God in whom we believe calls us to confront the Cross. That is what He is like: that stark, beautiful gift of a dear Son's life - that is God revealed - exposed to our senses.

Our faith - indeed our Creed - is Christocentric. The academic debate about the existence of God is idle speculation. "The greatest danger we run" wrote J.S. Whale, "is that we put a pipe in our mouth and our feet on the mantelpiece and sit down in an armchair to discuss theories of the atonement instead of bowing down before the wounds of Christ: that we scurry round the burning bush taking photographs from suitable angles instead of taking the shoes from our feet for the place whereon we stand is holy ground." (op.cit.p.23, Barclay).

My deepest faith is that we are drawn to the idea of God, not by the evidence alone. For that evidence is not always convincing. Rather the very question of God is raised in our minds, indeed will not leave our minds, because He has placed it there.

"We are restless till we find our rest in Thee", St. Augustine wrote. "My soul thirsteth for Thee, my flesh longeth for Thee in a dry and thristy land;" is the way the Psalmist put it. He is behind that thirst and a bit of it is quenched, when, by His grace, we are given to affirm...together..."I believe in God". Amen.

O Thou who art both the object and the subject of our faith, our hearts are restless till they find their rest in Thee. Grant us to know Thee more clearly - through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.